

Grant Request

February 20, 2012

Introduction

The central goal of the New Jersey Department of Education is to ensure that all children, regardless of life circumstances, graduate from high school ready for college and career. Currently, New Jersey is far from accomplishing this mission.

While in the aggregate New Jersey's students perform at nation-leading levels, the state has a number of troubling deficiencies. On the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) exam, New Jersey ranked 50 out of 51 states (including DC) in the size of the achievement gap between low and high-income students in 8th grade reading. Tens of thousands of children attend schools where only a minority of students meets basic levels of proficiency in reading and math. Across the state, over 40 percent of third graders are not reading on grade level. And perhaps most alarmingly, a distressingly high percentage of those who do graduate from high school are unprepared for success: nearly 90 percent of students entering some of New Jersey's community colleges require remediation.

The State of New Jersey has a comprehensive strategy for solving these challenges. It begins with an unwavering commitment to the highest expectations for all students and a single-minded, measureable goal of ensuring all students leave high school with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed throughout life which for us means truly prepared for college and career. While the NJDOE celebrates its successes, the Department also must honestly acknowledge the massive improvements that must be achieved to meet its ambitious goals. The NJDOE intends to close the achievement gap so student performance is no longer a function of demographics while simultaneously pushing New Jersey's highest performing students to compete with and exceed the accomplishments of their excelling peers in other states and across the globe.

To execute these goals, the NJDOE has undertaken a series of drastic organizational and philosophical changes. Organizationally, the NJDOE has restructured around four building blocks of reform—levers that the Department believes are key to substantial and lasting improvement. They include Academics (standards, assessments, curriculum, and instruction), Talent (educator effectiveness), Performance (targets, measurement, and accountability), and Innovation (high-quality, nontraditional methods of delivering K-12 schooling). Each building block has its own division, and each division is led by an experienced executive with expert staff. The NJDOE is also completely reorganizing how we engage with and intervene in schools and districts. The NJDOE's new system of seven field-based Regional Achievement Centers (RACs) will be charged with driving improvement across the state, especially in New Jersey's lowest-performing schools. These offices will be led by master educators who bear specific accountability for student achievement gains in their regions and for executing coherent plans that will marshal NJDOE resources to accomplish those goals.

Plan Overview

It is within the context of the Department's comprehensive reform strategy that New Jersey is seeking grant funds to address the state's persistent achievement gap by accelerating three key school turnaround initiatives:

1. Streamlining accountability through the creation and syndication of a School Performance Report system that will automatically aggregate, analyze, and produce benchmark data and written commentary, enabling identification of lowest performing schools and targeted interventions;
2. Building Regional Achievement Center infrastructure to support and turnaround the state's lowest performing schools, and;
3. Pursuing advanced interventions for persistently failing schools that require more dramatic action. Advanced interventions may include state-led school closure, establishment of an Achievement School District (similar to Recovery School Districts in other states), and the creation of an external turnaround partners program to facilitate the entrance of high-quality school operators into low performing areas.

Taken together, these initiatives represent a transformative approach to school turnaround grounded in student outcomes and focused on supporting schools as they work to improve. The scope of these initiatives will reach every student in the state by facilitating the creation of a clear system of accountability across all schools. Direct interventions to improve underperforming schools will reach approximately 253 schools and almost 185,000 students. The impact of this work will begin to be felt as early as the fall of 2012 in the lowest performing schools in the state. By 2015, a thorough assessment of the state's turnaround initiatives will be possible.

While primary ownership for school turnaround initiatives falls under the leadership of the Deputy Commissioner and Chief Academic Officer, each of the Department's Chief Officers will play a role. For example, the Chief Talent Officer will help guide the development of a Principal Leadership Academy to ensure high quality leadership within turnaround schools. The Chief Performance Officer will oversee the development of School Performance Reports that will inform intervention approaches. The Chief Innovation Officer will lead efforts to build an Achievement School District to turnaround persistently poor performing schools that fail to improve.

Turnaround Initiatives

1. Streamlining accountability

New Jersey is committed to reorganizing and redirecting the Department's 'touch points' with struggling schools and districts so they are focused on improving educational outcomes for children, rather than primarily focused on compliance. New Jersey's recent NCLB waiver provided the opportunity to align school, district, state, and federal accountability. The heart of New Jersey's new accountability system is the

School Performance Report (SPR), which will be produced for each public school within the state. The SPRs will be more than just a report card. They will save the entire NJ education system time and money by automatically aggregating, analyzing, producing benchmarks and written commentary on many layers of data. These reports will diagnose absolute and relative performance. In addition to providing detailed metrics broken down by subgroup and subject, the SPR will contain composite grades for overall student achievement, overall student progress year to year, overall success in achieving college and career ready benchmarks, graduation and post-secondary enrollment, and the school's designation as a Priority, Focus or Reward school (explained below). The SPR will also contain a Peer School Comparison ranking of how the school's overall composite grades compare to schools educating students with similar demographics.

The SPR fills a critical gap in the state's current accountability system by providing valid, reliable, and meaningful distinctions between schools, enabling supports and interventions to be targeted toward schools that are struggling with within-school achievement gaps, low subgroup performance, and school-wide failure.

Identification of Schools

A critical component of School Performance Reports will be the identification of schools targeted for varying degrees of intervention:

1. **Priority Schools:** Identify the lowest performing schools across the state with regard to absolute achievement or graduation outcomes and those that are persistently low achieving (SIG) schools. Structure intense, mandatory interventions and supports that address school-wide failure and that adhere to the turnaround principles. The state has identified 74 schools, serving a total of 39,000 students, in an initial estimate of Priority Schools.
2. **Focus Schools:** Identify schools where particular subgroups are demonstrating a lack of success in achievement or graduation outcomes and where within-school achievement gaps are the largest. Identify targeted interventions and supports that are specific to the particular subgroup, such as strategies for English Language Learners or students with disabilities. The state has identified 179 schools, serving a total of 145,000 students, in an initial estimate of Focus schools.
3. **Reward Schools:** Recognize, celebrate and reward schools with high overall and subgroup achievement levels or those that are demonstrating great growth or progress.
4. **All Other Schools:** Provide detailed, specific data to illustrate the strengths and areas in need of improvement for all schools, regardless of Title I status, so that progress in every subgroup in every school building can be tracked and can be used to inform school improvement activities.

Next steps and timeline

Although initial work to design the School Performance Report system has begun, analytical and project management support is needed in order to launch the SPR in time for the 2012-2013 school year. Specifically, determining the SPR metrics, their various weights in a composite scoring system, and the formulation of appropriate peer school criteria will require significant additional analytical capacity that does not yet exist within the NJDOE. Project management support is needed to develop plans to embed the SPR at the district level, educate district and school leaders in how to make use of the new system, and build public awareness about the new report (including the identification of Priority and Focus schools).

2. Building Regional Achievement Center (RAC) infrastructure

Utilizing the data and intervention classifications made possible by the School Performance Report system, starting in September 2012 the NJDOE will support and intervene in meaningful, lasting ways in both Priority and Focus Schools. With guidance and support from the Department's senior leadership, the NJDOE's newly created Regional Achievement Centers will take the lead on developing and implementing customized interventions based on the needs of each Priority and Focus school. Seven regional teams, comprised of 12-15 experts in school turnaround principles and content expertise, will be built to provide targeted assistance to schools that need the most support.

Quality School Reviews will be used to differentiate interventions in order to meet the needs of each school. Intensive interventions have been developed to address the following:

School Climate and Culture: Establishing school environments that support the social, emotional and health needs of all students

School Leadership: Ensuring that the principal has the ability to lead the turnaround effort

Standards Aligned Curriculum, Assessment and Intervention System: Ensuring teachers have the foundational documents needed to teach to the rigorous college and career ready standards that have been adopted

Instruction: Ensuring teachers utilize research-based effective instruction to meet the needs of all students

Use of Time: Redesigning time to better meet student needs and increase teacher collaboration focused on improving teaching and learning

Use of Data: Ensuring school-wide use of data focused on improving teaching and learning

Staffing Practices: Developing the skills to better recruit, retain and develop effective teachers

Family and Community Engagement: Increasing academically focused family and community engagement

Resources developed by the NJDOE and used in interventions will include: model CCSS aligned curriculum and assessments, professional development supporting improved instruction, a web-based instructional improvement system (IIS) for improving teaching and learning, guidelines for identifying quality enhanced and extended learning opportunities, as well as innovative strategies to support low-performing students. The RAC may also work with the LEA to remove and reassign a school principal in the event that principal is unable to lead the turnaround effort, or to provide flexibility in the areas of scheduling, budget, staffing and curriculum.

Priority school interventions will be closely monitored and continued for a two-year period of time which may be extended to three years if the NJDOE determines, in its sole discretion, that a Priority school is not making substantial progress.

Next steps and timeline

The Department aims to begin interventions in Priority schools starting in September 2012. In order to meet this aggressive timeline, during the spring of 2012 the Department must:

- Recruit and hire Regional Achievement Directors to lead each of the 7 regions;
- Repurpose existing staff to serve on RAC teams and hire additional team members as necessary;
- Build and execute comprehensive professional development plans to ensure that teams are prepared to conduct successful interventions;
- Conduct effective outreach to districts and other stakeholders, engaging them in the plan and incorporating their feedback;
- Launch 7 regional offices;
- Design best practice intervention strategies and plan for delivery;
- Set specific interim and annual performance targets for each Priority and Focus School, and;
- Create individualized intervention plans for each Priority school and plans for intervening in Focus schools.

The Department expects to hire several existing employees to serve in the Regional Achievement Centers, but many external hires are also anticipated. The Department does not have the capacity to conduct rigorous, high quality recruitment efforts, and is therefore requesting consultant or search firm support to ensure that high quality candidates are identified and successfully recruited to serve in the Regional Achievement Centers.

While the Regional Achievement Centers will eventually be self-sustaining, management consulting support is needed to conduct in-depth research to ensure best practice design and implementation and to build the regional infrastructure in time for fall 2012. Once the RACs are launched, continued consultant support is needed to ensure smooth and successful implementation in year one.

In addition to the Regional Achievement Centers, the NJDOE plans to reconstitute three Superintendent and Principal Leadership Academies in order to provide support and coaching to leaders in Priority and Focus schools. The NJDOE expects districts to eventually contribute to the Academy to make it self-supporting, but is seeking seed funds to develop and introduce the Academy. This is likely to include a partnership with a leading school leadership organization, such as the NYCLA.

3. Pursuing advanced Interventions

In approaching our work with schools and districts to implement the Regional Achievement Center interventions described above, NJDOE will seek to collaborate with local educators, superintendents and boards of education. We anticipate that schools and districts will find our supports to be both valuable and impactful. However, in the rare instances where local schools, districts, or boards of education are either unwilling or incapable of pursuing improvement strategies in a collaborative fashion, or where sufficient improvement is not made, NJDOE will exercise its authority to ensure that every child has access to a quality education.

The Department seeks to build a comprehensive ‘advanced intervention’ plan that is likely to include three key components:

First, the state will conduct research and create plans to exercise its authority to close failing schools that do not improve. While the state already has authority to close schools, there is no precedent as the last state-led school closure in New Jersey took place over two decades ago. Closing schools will require legal research, extensive operational planning, and a strong communications and outreach plan.

Second, though we believe strongly that the interventions delivered by Regional Achievement Center teams will lead to substantial improvements in our Priority Schools, in some instances further measures will be in order. Some schools with long track records of underperformance and limited capacity may be unable to improve to the degree or at the pace required to serve students well. Similarly, in some cases, the state may come to the conclusion that another organization will be better positioned than the district to operate a school.

Accordingly, the Department plans to support legislation establishing an Achievement School District based on similar entities in Louisiana and Tennessee. This legislation will empower the Commissioner of Education to assume control of persistently failing

schools, turn their management over to an independent operator, and establish conditions that will enable that operator to succeed.

Under new ASD legislation, once a school falls into Priority status, it will automatically become eligible for the Achievement School District (ASD). The decision of the Commissioner to put a school in the ASD cannot be appealed. The Commissioner's decision will be based on a number of factors, including:

- The degree of the school's underperformance
- The persistence of the school's underperformance
- The capacity of the district and the school to generate improvement
- The availability of high-performing independent operators
- The capacity of high-performing independent operators
- The availability of independent support organizations to assist school operators
- The capacity of the New Jersey Department of Education to monitor schools in the ASD

Under a draft proposal, the ASD can use "whatever manner is determined best" by the ASD leadership to bring about change in the school. A child of an ASD school can choose to stay in that school or go to another district or charter school. An ASD school will receive the same funding in the same manner as the school received prior to its transfer into the ASD. All schools in the ASD will be freed from the district's collective bargaining agreement, and the school's operator will have control over personnel decisions in the school.

Schools in the ASD will negotiate ambitious performance agreements with the state and the state will monitor the school's performance closely. Schools that improve adequately will be eligible for removal from the ASD. Schools that continue to have low levels of student performance will be subject to additional state interventions, including closure.

Finally, the state will use its current set of authorities to vigorously recruit high-performing operators to start new schools in districts with Priority Schools. During the application review process, the department will give preference to proposals that seek to locate in these districts and serve students in the grade spans found in the district's Priority Schools. To facilitate entrance of high quality operators, the state will develop an external partners program that provides advance authorization to carefully vetted turnaround organizations.

Next steps and timeline

Over the next year, the Department will initiate several advanced intervention components that are not impacted by legislation. Specifically, the NJDOE plans to:

- Research and identify potential intervention partners and school operators;

- Begin the cultivation of intervention partners, including initiating multi-year startup funds, and;
- Build a partnership to boost the pipeline of talented teachers and school leaders working in Priority and Focus school districts;
- Conduct in-depth research and create a detailed plan for the creation of the Achievement School District that builds upon the work and lessons of other states. Upon the passage of legislation, the Department intends to activate ASD plans immediately.

The Department is seeking financial support to:

- Fund management consultants to guide the advanced intervention research and design work (overarching strategy plus component parts);
- To support cultivation of intervention partners and research to identify those partners;
- To support a partnership to build a pipeline of high quality leaders and teachers in low performing districts, and;
- To support a high quality process for charter renewal and preparedness.

Accountability

New Jersey will measure the success of its school turnaround strategy by assessing whether Priority and Focus Schools meet specific goals for improvement in student achievement defined at the beginning of the intervention period. Early indicators of progress in meeting goals will be available by the end of the 2012-2013 school year. A more thorough assessment of the impact of school turnaround efforts is expected by 2015.

In addition to setting and tracking clear goals for individual schools where the Department provides intervention support, milestones and key activities to support each turnaround initiative will be developed and tracked to ensure high-quality implementation on a rigorous timeline.

Budget

The Department is repurposing all available school improvement funds to support turnaround work, including redirecting~ \$24M in state and federal funding per year (totaling \$59M over the requested grant period). This includes shifting ~166 existing staff members, most with school leadership experience, to support turnaround work through the Regional Achievement Centers.

Additional support in the amount of \$7,639,600 is respectfully requested to support the state's turnaround initiatives:

1. Streamline accountability

- Team of consultants (6 consultants at \$140,000) to support the creation and syndication of School Performance Report system that will automatically aggregate, analyze, and produce benchmark data and written commentary, enabling identification of lowest performing schools and targeted interventions
 - Funding need: \$1,260,000 over 1.5 years
2. Building infrastructure to support school improvement
- Recruitment of Regional Achievement Directors to lead regional teams (partnership with recruiting firm and cost of ad/web placement)
 - Funding need: \$200,000 over six months
 - Team of consultants (2 consultants at \$140,000 for 1.5 years) to conduct in-depth research and guide launch of Regional Achievement Centers (e.g., designing delivery strategies, designing and executing PD plans, and supporting strategic communication and outreach); initial screening, executive coaching, master principal coaching, and training of regional and school leaders (of Priority and Focus Schools) to ensure consistent and disciplined approach to turnaround (\$5,000/day - 8 3-day coaching sessions (based on the 8 turnaround principles) plus twice monthly follow up for 22 months)
 - Funding need: \$760,000 over 2.5 years
 - Launch of 3 Superintendent and Principal Leadership Academies for training of leaders in Priority and Focus Schools (partnership with NLNS, NYCLA, or similar group)
 - Funding need: \$1,250,000 over 2.5 years
3. Advanced interventions
- Team of consultants (6 consultants at varying rates, totaling \$114,400 per month) to provide in-depth research and recommendations on advanced intervention strategies; project management support for advanced intervention activities
 - Funding need: \$1,029,600 over 9 months
 - Funding to support cultivation of intervention partners, including recruitment and startup costs (\$200,000 - \$400,000 per partner, 5 – 10 partners)
 - Funding need: \$2,000,000 over two years
 - Funding to form partnership to build a pipeline of high quality school leaders and teachers in Priority and Focus districts (\$500,000 per year)
 - Funding need: \$1,000,000 over two years
 - Funding to build charter school quality by utilizing the expertise of the National Association for Charter School Authorizers (NACSA) to guide charter renewal and new charter preparedness efforts (\$40,000 per year for renewal site visits and \$30,000 for new charter preparedness site visits)
 - Funding need: \$140,000 over two years